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My Brother and Father Are American Hostages in Iran. When Will They Be Free?

Opinion by **Babak Namazi**

Tuesday, Oct. 13, marks five years since my brother Siamak Namazi was taken hostage by the Iranian regime. He has had to endure five years of horrific conditions in Iran's notorious Evin Prison, including being beaten, Tasered, tortured and held in prolonged solitary confinement. For the rest of our family, it has been years of trying to navigate the nightmare of bringing him home, knowing that any letter or call we receive from him could be the last.

Siamak, who was arrested in 2015, is now the longest detained American currently held by Iran. A few months after he was taken into custody, Iranian Revolutionary Guards lured my father, Baquer Namazi, back to the country to visit his son in prison. He was then also arrested and placed in Evin Prison. Despite his age — he is now 84 — my father was subjected to solitary confinement for extended periods. In October 2016, they were both convicted on baseless charges of “collaboration with a hostile foreign government” — the United States — and sentenced to 10 years in prison.

As Siamak passes this grim anniversary, with my father not far behind him, I am urging leaders of the United States and other major countries to take decisive action to bring both of them home. Failing to do so could cost my brother and father their lives.

The novel coronavirus continues to devastate Iran, with the country hitting its highest day of confirmed infections last week. While Iran granted or extended furloughs for about 120,000 prisoners in the beginning of the pandemic — a precaution the Iranian judiciary repeatedly denied Siamak — it is now bringing prisoners back in droves. Siamak remains trapped in the middle of the simultaneous spike in infections and the expansion of the prison population, with potentially deadly consequences.

Although the Iranian government allowed my father to leave Evin Prison because of multiple emergency hospitalizations — a direct acknowledgment of the severity of his health problems — it refuses to let him travel abroad for desperately needed medical treatment. These life-threatening problems include heart conditions that resulted in two heart-related surgeries while in custody and severe blockages in the major arteries to his brain. Iran's choice to continue holding

him hostage is effectively a death sentence. I cannot digest the sustained cruelty imposed on such a vulnerable individual.

And beneath all of this is the ever-present threat of escalating U.S.-Iran tensions. With the two countries facing off over nuclear issues, sanctions and other highly controversial matters, I am in constant fear that Iran will reach for its most vulnerable and accessible pawns: American hostages.

Over the past few weeks my family has been moved by the many tweets and other social media statements from members of Congress, as well as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, calling on Iran to immediately release my loved ones. We were also thrilled to see their names included along with that of another American hostage, conservationist Morad Tahbaz, in the recent announcement of new human rights sanctions on Iranian officials. The U.S. government needs to build on this momentum and continue pushing for their release through any avenue possible.

This push cannot and should not be limited to efforts by the United States. Iran's barbaric campaign of strategically imprisoning and torturing foreign and dual nationals has affected countries worldwide. In the past few years alone, Tehran has unjustly imprisoned citizens of the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, Austria, France, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands and Lebanon. I was happy to see that France, Germany and Britain summoned their Iranian ambassadors to discuss the issue of hostages, and I encourage other countries to follow suit. I also urge them to translate their words into actions, such as potentially tying covid-19 aid for Iran to the release of all wrongly detained dual and foreign nationals — a move Pompeo suggested this year. It is long past time for the world to convey the clear message to Iran that its hostage-taking is not an effective foreign policy tool and that its attempts to use it as such will not be tolerated.

My family and I were given a sense of renewed hope when President Trump sat down with a group of former American hostages during the Republican National Convention in August and promised that the remaining American hostages will "be back very soon." I hope that he and his administration will match those words with commensurate action, both unilateral and multilateral, so that my brother and father will be with us again soon.

We have all suffered more than anyone should. Let my innocent family go.

Babak Namazi is the brother of Siamak Namazi and the son of Baquer Namazi, American citizens held hostage in Iran.